

## Death and Dying in Central Appalachia: Changing Attitudes and Practices

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to the Iowa House of Representatives. Thereafter, instead of "doing it," he talked about it. *Fly in the Buttermilk*, as the capstone of his second career, tells us something about retirement.

For some, this something leaves much to be desired, yet here again the reticence is revealing. Victorians yearned for privacy as much as propriety, and the architecture of their homes and the style of their clothes were designed to keep out the intrusive industrial world. Add the oppression and repression of racism to the assault of technology, and Reed's success at staying afloat on the buttermilk stands out as a heroic achievement.

In this context his youngest son's suicide illustrates the negative side of the book's central image; the fly can be overwhelmed and drown. Why the son and not the father is a question Reed has the wisdom not to try to answer. Moreover, when he admits that his son's suicide is the one stumbling block he cannot turn into a stepping stone, he unlocks the prison door of denying one's limits that led Victorians to victory and their children to defeat in far-off places like Vietnam. Yet, as Reed makes clear in his concluding passage, to accept one's limits and to cease to struggle allows the "fly in the buttermilk" to fly, even soar, rather than fall and sink. It is just such truth that could take us beyond racism and that makes *Fly in the Buttermilk* a worthwhile read for Americans and especially Iowans.

*Death and Dying in Central Appalachia: Changing Attitudes and Practices*, by James K. Crissman. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994. xii, 247 pages. Illustrations, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$13.95 paper.

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*Death and Dying in Central Appalachia* fills a void in the study of twentieth-century funeral and burial practices. Death and the rituals connected with it are constant factors in human experience, and activities associated with death are precise social indicators, revealing community attitudes and traditions.

Beginning in the 1970s, James Crissman interviewed almost four hundred people in a five-state area in central Appalachia (Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky). He also surveyed hundreds of books, articles, and other written sources, and used more than one thousand audio recordings made since 1922. In addition, he draws on personal experiences from a lifetime spent in the region. The information he gathered encompasses funeral and burial practices of the entire twentieth century, with reminiscences from the latter part of the nineteenth century. Most of Crissman's

informants, or at least the family groups from which they came, were rural people. It is the transition from rural to more urban, from isolated to contact with the mainstream United States culture, that accounts for most of the changes described in the book.

Crissman organized his material according to the sequence in which events related to death would ordinarily happen. He begins with the "death watch" and the preparation of the body after death, then describes the coffins, the digging of graves, the visitation, and the funeral service itself, and, finally, discusses the burial, the marking of the grave, and memorialization afterwards. In the final two chapters Crissman reports on the theme of death and dying in Appalachian music, and on deaths resulting from coal mining dangers and disasters. The narrative flows smoothly until these two final chapters, which are excellent topical studies but not a part of the sequential process of death and burial.

Although the book is cast as a regional study, there are significant similarities between the practices in the area Crissman studied and those I have identified through interviews with several hundred people in the smaller, but equally identifiable region where I grew up, encompassing ten counties in southern Iowa and four adjoining counties in northern Missouri. Among the similarities between the two geographic areas are such things as the euphemisms for the words *dead* and *died*, the inability to pass through childhood without close experiences with death in the home, the "death watch" (which we called the "setting up"), premonitions of death, washing, dressing, and laying out the body, burial without spectacles, clothing worn at funerals, methods of grave digging, post mortem photography, use of flowers and mourning jewelry, choice of songs at funerals, and the ways Memorial Day is commemorated (we called it Decoration Day). On the other hand, Crissman notes a number of practices, such as the use of shrouds, burial with the corpse wearing shoes, painting the coffin, long sermons at funerals, construction of grave houses, and the practice of delayed funeralizing, which are common in his area but not practiced in southern Iowa.

The similarities are more striking than the contrasts, perhaps because many settlers in southern Iowa trace their ancestry back to people who, in the mid-nineteenth century, lived in Crissman's region. What is surprising is that after a separation of at least two generations, funeral and burial practices should have retained so many similarities. Obviously people in southern Iowa and northern Missouri retained their customs, rather than creating customs of their own or yielding to influence by neighbors who traced their ancestry to New England or other northern states.

Crissman's book provides the benchmark against which additional studies of death and dying in other regions may be measured. It is a very interesting and readable book, and despite a title that may not have general appeal, most people would probably enjoy the narrative.

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